THE NOMAD

By ROBERT HICHENS

I

THE fate of Madame Lemaire had certainly not been an ordinary one. She was French, of Marseilles, as you could tell by her accent, especially when she said *"C'est bien!"* and had been an extremely coquettish and lively girl, with a strong will of her own and a passionate love of pleasure and of town life. From her talk when she was seventeen, you would have gathered that if she ever moved from Marseilles it would be to go to Paris. Nothing else would be good enough for her. She felt herself born to play a part in some great city.

And yet, at the age of forty, here she was in the desert of Sahara, keeping an *auberge* at El-Kelf under the salt mountain! She sometimes wondered how it had ever come about, when she crossed the court of the inn, round which mules of customers were tethered in open sheds, or when she served the rough Algerian wine to farmers from the Tell, or to some dusty commercial traveller from Batna, in the arbour trellised with vines that fronted the desert.

Marie Lemaire, who had been Marie Bretelle, at El-Kelf! Marie Lemaire in the desert of Sahara attending upon God knows whom: Algerians, Spahis, camel-drivers, gazelle-hunters! No; it was too much!

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But if you have a "kink" in you, to what may you not come? Marie Bretelle's "kink" had been an idiotic softness for handsome faces.

She wanted to shine in the world, to cut a dash, to go to Paris; or, if that were impossible, to stay in Marseilles married to some rich city man, and to give parties, and to get gowns from Madame Vannier, of the Rue de Cliche, and hats from Trebichot, of the Rue des Colonies, and to attend the theatres, and to be stared at and pointed out on to the race-course, and—and, in fact, to be the belle of Marseilles. And here she was at El-Kelf and all because of that "kink" in her nature!

Lemaire had had a handsome face and been a fine man, stalwart, bold, muscular, determined. He did not belong to Marseilles, but had come there to give an acrobatic show in a music-hall; and there Marie Bretelle had seen him, dressed in silver-spangled tights, and doing marvellous feats on three parallel bars. His bare arms had lumps on them like balls of iron, his fair moustaches were trained into points, his bold eyes were lit with a fire to fascinate women; and—well, Marie Bretelle ran away with him and became Madame Lemaire. And so she came to Algiers, where Lemaire had an accident while giving his performance. And that was the beginning of the Odyssey which had ended at El-Kelf.

"Fool—fool—fool!"

Often she said that to herself, as she went about the inn doing her duties with grains of sand in her hair.

"Fool—fool—fool!"

The word was taken by the wind of the waste and carried away to the desert.

After his accident Lemaire lost his engagements. Then

he lost his looks. He put on flesh. He ceased to train his moustaches into points. The great muscles got soft, were covered with flabby fat. Finally he took to drink. And so they drifted.

To earn some money he became many things—guide, *concierge,* tout for "La Belle Fatma." He had impossible professions in Algiers. And Marie? Well, it were best not to scrutinise her life too closely under the burning sun of Africa. Whatever it was, it was not very successful; and they drifted from Algiers. Where did they go? Where had they not been in this fiery land? Oran on the Moroccan border had seen them, and the mosques of Kairouan, windy Tunis, and rock-bound Constantine, laughing Bougie in its wall by the water, Fort National in the Grande Kabyle. They had been everywhere. And at last some wind of the desert had blown them, like poor grains of desert sand, from the bending palms of Biskra to the mud walls of El-Kelf.

And here—Gold help them!—for ten years they had been keeping the inn, "Au Retour du Desert."

For ten, long, dry years, and such an inn! Why, at Marseilles they would have called it—well, one cannot tell what they would have called it on the Cannebiere! But they would have found a name for it, that is certain.

It stood alone, this inn, quite alone in the desert, which at El-Kelf circles a small oasis in which there is hidden among fair-sized palms a meagre Arab village. Why the inn should have been built outside of the oasis, away from the village, I cannot tell you. But so it is. It seems to be disdainful of the earth houses of the Arabs, to be determined to have nothing to do with them. And yet there is little reason in its disdain.

For it, too, is built on sun-dried earth for the most part, and has only the ground floor possessed by most of them. It stands facing flat but not illimitable desert. The road that passes before it winds way to land where there is water; and from the trellised arbour, but far off, one can see in the sunshine the sharp, shrill green of crops, grown by the Spahis whose tented camp lies to the right of the caravan track that leads over the Col de Sfa to Biskra.

Far, far along that road one can see from the inn, till its whiteness is as the whiteness of a thread, and any figures travelling upon it are less than little dolls, and even a caravan is but a moving dimness shrouded in a dimness of dust. But towards evening, when the strange clearness of Africa becomes almost terribly acute, every speck upon the thread has a meaning to attract the eye, and set the mind at work asking:

"What is this that is coming upon the road? Who is this that travels? Is it a mounted man on his thin horse, with his matchlock pointing to the sky? Or is it a woman hunched upon a trotting donkey? Or a Nomad on his camel? Or is it only some poor desert man, half naked in his rags, who tramps on his bare brown feet along sun-baked track, his hood drawn above his eyes, his knotted club in his hand?"

After ten years Madame Lemaire still asked herself such questions in the arbour of the inn, when business was slack, when her husband was away, or was lying half drunk upon the bed after an extra dose of absinthe, and the one-eyed Arab servant, Hadj, was squatting on his haunches in a corner smoking keef.

Not that the answer mattered at all to her. She ex-

pected nothing of the road that led from the desert. But her mind, stagnant though it had become in the solitude of Africa, had to do something to occupy itself. And so she often stared across the plain, with an aimless *"Je me demande"* trembling upon her lips, and a hard expression of inquiry in her dark brown eyes, whose lids were seamed with tiny wrinkles. Perhaps you will wonder why Madame Lemaire, having once had a passionate love for pleasure and a strong will of her own, had consented to remain for ten years in the solitude of El-Kelf, drudging in a miserable *auberge,* to which few people, and those but poor ones, ever came.

Circumstances and Robert Lemaire had been too much for her. Both had been cruel. She was something of a slave to both. Lemaire was an utter failure, but there lurked within him still, under the waves of absinthe, traces of the dominating power which had long ago made him a success.

Madame Lemaire had worshipped him once, had adored his strength and beauty. They were gone now. He was a wreck. But he was a wreck with fierceness in it. And command with him had become a habit. And Africa bids one accept. And so Madame Lemaire had stayed for ten long years drudging at the inn beside the salt mountain, and staring down the long white road for the something strange and interesting from the desert that never, never came.

And still Lemaire drank absinthe, and cursed and drowsed. For ten long years! And still Hadj squatted upon his haunches and drugged himself with keef. And still Madame Lemaire stood under the trellised vine, with

the sand-grains in her hair, and gazed and gazed over the plain.

And when a black speck appeared far off upon the whiteness of the track, she watched it till her eyes ached, demanding who, or what, it was—whether a Spahi on horseback, a woman on her donkey, a Nomad on his camel, or some dark and half-naked pedestrian of the sands, that travelled through the sunset glory towards the lonely inn.

Although Robert Lemaire was a wreck he was not an old man in years, only forty-five, and the fine and tonic air of the Sahara preserved from complete destruction. Shaggy and unkept he was, with a heavy bulk of chest and shoulders, a large, pale face, and the angry and distressed eyes of the absinthe slave. His hands trembled habitually, and on his bad days fluttered like leaves. But there was still some force in his prematurely aged body, still some will in his mind. He was a wreck, but he was the wreck of one who had been really a man and accustomed to dominate women. And this he did not forget.

One evening—it was in May, and the long heats of the desert had already set in—Lemaire was away from the *auberge,* shooting near the salt mountain with an acquaintance, a colonist who had a small farm not far from Biskra, and who had come to spend the night at El-Kelf. This man had a history. He had once been a hotel-keeper, and had reason to suspect a guest in his hotel of having guilty intercourse with his wife.

One night, having discovered beyond possibility of doubt that his suspicions were well founded, he waited till the hotel was closed, then made his way to his guest's room, and put three bullets into him as he lay asleep in

his bed. For this murder, or act of justice, he got only ten months' imprisonment. But his business as a hotel-keeper was ruined. So now he was a small farmer. He was also, perhaps, the only real friend Lemaire had in Africa, and he came occasionally to spend a night at the Retour du Desert.

Upon this evening of May, Madame Lemaire was alone in the inn with the one-eyed servant Hadj preparing supper for the two sportsmen. The flies buzzed about under the dusty leaves of the vine, which were unstirred by any breeze. The crystals upon the flanks of the salt mountain glittered in the sun that was still fiery, though not far from its declining.

Upon the dry, earthen walls of the inn and over the stones of the court round which it was built, the lizards crept, or rested with eager, glancing patience, as if alert for further movement, but waiting for a signal. A mule or two stamped in the long stable that was open to the court, and a skeleton of a white Kabyle dog slunk to and fro searching for scraps with his lips curled back from his pointed teeth.

And Madame Lemaire went slowly about her work with the sand-grains in her hair, and the flies buzzing around her.

Nothing had happened. Nothing ever did happen at El-Kelf. But for some mysterious reason Madame Lemaire suddenly felt to-day that her existence in the desert had become insupportable. It may have been that Africa, gradually draining away the Frenchwoman's vitality, had on this day removed the last little drop of the force that had, till now, enabled her to face her life, however dully, however wearily.

It may have been that there was some peculiar and unusual heaviness in the air that was generally of a feathery lightness. Or the reason may have been mental, and Africa may have drawn from this victim's nature, on this particular day, a grain, small as a grain of sand, of will-power that was absolutely necessary for the keeping of the woman's stamina upon its feet.

However it was, she felt that she collapsed. She did not cry. She did not curse. She did not faint, or lie down and stare with desperate eyes at the vacant dying day. She did not neglect her domestic duties, and was even now tearing, with a flat key, the cover from some tinned veal and ham for the evening's supper. But something within her had abruptly raised its voice. She seemed to hear it saying: "I can't bear any more!" and to know that it spoke the truth. No longer could she bear it: the African sun on the brown-earth walls, the settling of the sand-grains in her hair, the movement of the flies about her face, wrinkled permaturely by the perpetual dry heat and by the desert winds; the brazen sky above her, the iron land beneath, the silence—like the silence that was before creation, or the monotonous sounds that broke it; the mule's stamp on the stones, the barking of the guard-dogs upon the palm roofs of the distant houses in the village, the sneering laugh of the jackals by night, that whining song of Hadj, as he wagged his shaven head over the pipe-bowl into which he pressed the keef that was bringing him to madness.

She could not bear it any more.

The look in her face scarcely altered. The corners of her mouth, long since grown grim, did not droop any more than usual. Her thin, hard hands were steady as

they did their dreary work. But the woman who had resisted somehow during ten terrible years of incomparable monotony suddenly died within Marie Lemaire, and the girl of Marseilles, Marie Bretelle, shrieked out in the middle-aged, haggard body.

"This fate was not meant for me. I cannot bear it any more."

Presently the tin which had held the veal and ham was empty, save for some bits of opaque jelly that still clung round its edges; and Madame Lemaire went over to the dimly burning charcoal with a dirty old pan in her hand.

Marie Bretelle was still shrieking out, but Madame Lemaire must get ready the supper for her absinthe-soaked husband, and his friend the murderer from Alfa.

The sportsmen were late in returning, and Madame Lemaire's task was finished before they came. She had nothing more to do, and she came out to the arbour that looked upon the road. Here there was an old table stained with the lees of wine. About it stood three or four rickety chairs. Madame Lemaire sat down—dropped down, rather—on one of these, laid her arms upon the table, and gazed down the empty road.

"Mon Dieu!" she said to herself. *"Mon Dieu!"* She beat one hand on the table and said it aloud.

"Mon Dieu! Mon Dieu!"

She stared up at the vine. The leaves were sandy, and she saw insects running over them. She watched them. What were they doing? What purpose could they have? What purpose could anything have?

Always the hand tapped, tapped upon the table.

And Marseilles! It was still there by the sea, crowded,

gay with life. This was the time when the life began to grow turbulent. The cascades were roaring under the lifted gardens, where the beasts roamed in their cages. The awnings were out over the cafés in that city of cafés. She could almost see the coloured edges of stuff fluttering in the wind that came from the arbour and from the Château d'If. There was a sound of hammering along the sea. They were putting up the bathing sheds for the season. It would be good to go into the sea. It would cool one.

A beetle dropped from the vine on to the table, close to the beating hand. Madame Lemaire started violently. She got up, and went to stand in the entrance of the arbour. Marseilles was gone now. Africa was there.

For ten years she had been looking down the road. She looked down it once more.

It was the wonderful evening hour when Africa seems to lift itself toward the light, reluctant to be given to the darkness. Very far one could see, and with an almost supernatural distinctness. Yet Madame Lemaire strained her eyes, as people do at dusk when they strive to pierce a veil of gathering darkness.

What was coming along the road?

Her gaze travelled onwards over the hard and barren plain till it reached the green crops, on and on past the tents of the Spahis' encampment, near which rose a trail of smoke into the lucent air; farther still, farther and farther, until the whiteness narrowed towards the mountains, and at last was lost to sight.

And this evening, perhaps because she longed so much for something, for anything, there was nothing on the

road. It was a white emptiness under the setting sun.

Then the woman felt frantic, and she beat her hands together, and she cried aloud:

"If the Devil himself would only come along the road and ask me to go from this cursed hole of a place, I'd go with him! I'd go! I'd go!"

She repeated it shrilly, making wild gestures with her hands towards the desert. Her face was twisted awry. She looked just then like a desperate hag of a woman.

But it was the girl of Marseilles who was crying out in her. It was Marie Bretelle who was demanding the joys she had flung away in her youth for the sake of a handsome face.

"I'd go! I'd go!"

The shrill cry went up to the setting sun. But no one answered, and nothing darkened the arid whiteness of the road that wound across the plain and passed before the inn-door.

2

Night had fallen when the two sportsmen rode in on mules, tired and hungry. Hadj came from his keef to take the beasts, Madame Lemaire from her kitchen to ask if there were any birds for her to cook. Her husband gave her a string of them, and she turned away from him without a word, and went back into the house.

There was nothing odd in this, but something in his wife's face, seen only for a moment in the darkness of the court, had startled Lemaire, and he looked after her as if he were inclined to call her back; then said to his companion, Jacques Bouvier:

"Did you see Marie?"

"Yes. She looks as if she had just stumbled over a jackal," and he laughed.

Lemaire stood for a minute where he was. Then he shouted to Hadj:

"Hadj! A—Hadj!"

The one-eyed keef-smoker came.

"Who has been here to-day?"

"No one. A few have passed the door, but no one has entered."

"Good business!" said Bouvier, shrugging his shoulders.

"Business!" exclaimed Lemaire, with an oath. "It's a fine business we do here. Another ten years, and we shan't have put by ten sous."

"Perhaps that is why madame has such a face to-night!"

"We'll see at supper. Now for an absinthe!"

The two men walked stiffly into the inn, put their guns in a corner, went into the arbour that fronted the desert, and sat down by the table.

"Marie!" bawled Lemaire.

He struck his flabby fist down upon the wood.

"Marie, the absinthe!"

Madame Lemaire heard the hoarse shout in the kitchen, and her face went awry again:

"I'd go! I'd go!"

She hissed it under her breath.

"*Sacrà nom de Dieu!* Marie!"

"*V'lé!*"

"The devil! What a voice!" said Bouvier in the arbour.

Lemaire was half turned in his chair. His hands were

slightly shaking, and his large white face, with its angry and distressed eyes, looked startled.

"Who was that?" he said, moving in his chair as if he were going to get up.

"Who? Your wife!"

"No, it wasn't!"

"Well, then——"

At this moment there was a clink and a rattle, and Madame Lemaire came slowly out from the inn, carrying a tray with an absinthe bottle, a bottle of water, and two thick glasses with china saucers. She set it down between the two men. Her husband stared at her like one who stares suspiciously at a stranger.

"Was that you who called out?" he asked.

"Of course! Who else should it be? Who ever comes here?"

"Madame is a bit sick of El-Kelf," said Bouvier. "That's what is the matter."

Madame Lemaire compressed her lips tightly and said nothing.

Her husband looked more suspicious.

"Why should she be sick of it? She's done very well with it for ten years," he said roughly.

Madame Lemaire turned away and left the arbour. She was wearing slippers without heels, and went softly.

The two men sat in silence, looking at each other. A breath of wind, the first that had come that day, stole from the desert and rustled the leaves of the vine above their heads. Lemaire stretched out his trembling hand to the absinthe bottle.

"For God's sake let's have a drink!" he said. "There's

something about my wife that's given my blood a turn."

"Beat her!" said Bouvier, pushing forward his glass. "If you don't beat them be sure they'll betray you."

His wife's treachery had set him against all women. Lemaire growled something inarticulate. He was thinking of the days in Algiers, of their strange and often disgraceful existence there. Bouvier knew nothing of that.

"Come on!" he said.

And he lifted his glass of absinthe to his lips.

At supper that night Lemaire perpetually watched his wife. She seemed to be just as usual. For years there had been a sort of sickly weariness upon her face. It was there now. For years there had been a dull sound in her voice. He heard it to-night. For years she had had a poor appetite. She ate little at supper, had her habitual manner of swallowing almost with difficulty. Surely she was just as usual.

And yet she was not—she was not!

After supper the two men returned to the arbour to smoke and drink, and Madame Lemaire remained in the kitchen to clear away and wash up.

"Isn't there something the matter with my wife?" asked Lemaire, lighting a thin, black cigar, and settling his loose, bulky body in the small chair, with his fat legs stretched out, and one foot crossed over the other. "Or is it that I'm out of sorts to-night? It seems to me as if she were strange."

Bouvier was a small, pinched man, with a narrow face, evenly red in colour, large ears that stood out from his closely shaven head, and hot-looking, prominent brown eyes.

"Perhaps she's taken with some Arab," he said.

"P'f! She's dropped all that nonsense. The devil! A woman of forty's an old woman in Africa."

Bouvier spat.

"Isn't she?"

"Oh, don't ask me about women. Young or old, they're always calling the Devil to their elbow."

"What for?"

"To put them up to wickedness. Perhaps your wife's been calling him to-night. You look behind her presently, and you may catch a sight of him. He's always about where women are."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Lemaire laughed mirthlessly.

"D'you think he'd show himself to me?"

He emptied his glass. Bouvier suddenly looked terrible—looked like the man who had put three bullets into his sleeping guest.

"How did I know?" he said.

He leaned across the table towards Lemaire.

"How did I know?" he repeated in a low voice.

"What—when your wife——"

"Yes. They didn't let me see anything. They were too sharp. No; it was one night I saw *him,* with his mouth at her ear, coming in behind her through the door like a shadow. There!"

He sat back with his hands on his knees. Lemaire stared at him again.

Again the wind rustled furtively through the diseased vine-leaves of the arbour.

"It was then that I got out my revolver and charged it," continued Bouvier, in a less mysterious voice, as of

one returned to practical life. "For I knew she'd been up to some villainy. Pass the bottle!" . . .

"Pass the bottle! . . . Why don't you pass the bottle?"

"Pardon!"

Lemaire pushed the bottle over to his friend.

"What's the matter with you to-night?"

"Nothing. You mean to say . . . why d'you talk such nonsense? D'you think I'm a fool to be taken in by rubbish like that?"

"Well, then, why did you sit just as if you'd seen him?"

"I'm a bit tired to-night, that's what it is. We went a long way. The wine'll pull me together."

He poured out another glass.

"You don't mean to say," he continued, "you believe in the Devil?"

"Don't you?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Why not! Why should I? Nobody does—me, I mean. That sort of thing is all very well for women."

Bouvier said nothing, but sat with his arms on the table, staring out towards the desert. He looked at the empty road just in front of him, let his eyes travel along until it disappeared into the night.

"I say, that sort of thing is all very well for women," repeated Lemaire.

"I hear you."

"But I want to know whether you don't think the same."

"As you?"

"Yes; to be sure."

"I might have done once."

"But you don't now?"

"There's a devil in the desert; that's certain."

"Why?"

"Because I tell you he came out of the desert to turn my wife wrong."

"Then you weren't joking?"

"Not I. It's as true as that I went and charged my revolver, because I saw what I told you. Here's Madame coming out to join us."

Lemaire shifted heavily and abruptly in his chair.

"Hallo!" he said, in a brutal tone of voice. "What's up with you to-night?"

As he spoke he stared hard at his wife's shoulder, just by her ear.

"Nothing. What are you looking at? There isn't——"

She put up her hand quickly to her shoulder and felt over her dress.

"Ugh!" She shook herself. "I thought you'd seen a scorpion on me."

Bouvier, whose red face seemed to be deepening in colour under the influence of the red Algerian wine, burst out laughing.

"It wasn't a scorpion he was looking for," he exclaimed. His thin body shook with mirth till his chair creaked under him.

"It wasn't a scorpion," he repeated.

"What was it, then?" said Madame Lemaire.

She looked from one man to the other—from the one

who was strange in his laughter, to the other who was even stranger in his gravity.

"What have you been saying about me?" she said, with a flare-up of suspicion.

"Well," said Bouvier, recovering himself a little, "if you must know, we were talking about the Devil."

The woman stared and gave the table a shake. Some of her husband's wine was spilled over it.

"The Devil take you!" he bawled with sudden fury. "I only wish he would!"

The two men jumped back as if a viper of the sands had suddenly reared up its thin head between them.

"I only wish he would!"

It was Marie Bretelle who had spoken, the girl of Marseilles, who still lived in the body of Marie Lemaire. But it was Marie Lemaire from whom the two men shrank away—Marie Lemaire changed, startling, terrible, her haggard face furious with expression, her thin hands clutching at the edge of the table, from which the wine-bottle had fallen, to be smashed at their feet.

For a moment there was a dead silence succeeding that second shrill cry. Then Lemaire scrambled up heavily from his chair.

"What do you mean?" he stammered. "What do you mean?"

And then she told him, like a fury, and with the words which had surely been accumulating in her mind, like water behind a dam, for ten years. She told him what she had wanted, and what she had had. And when at last she had finished telling him, she stood for a minute, making mouths at him in silence, as if she still had something to say, some final word of summing up.

"Stop that!"

It was Lemaire who spoke; and as he spoke he thrust out one of his white, shaking hands to cover that nightmare mouth. But she beat his hand down, and screamed, with the gesture.

"And if the Devil himself would come along the road to fetch me from this cursed place, I'd go with him! D'you hear? I'd go with him! I'd go with him!"

When the scream died away, one-eyed Hadj was standing at the entrance to the arbour. Madame Lemaire felt that he was there, turned round, and saw him.

"I'd go with him if he was an Arab," she said, but almost muttering now, for her voice had suddenly failed her, though her passion was still red-hot. "Even the Arabs—they're better than you, absinthe-soaked, do-nothing Roumis, who sit and drink, drink——"

Her voice cracked, went into a whisper, disappeared. She thrust out her hand, swept the glasses off the table to follow the bottle, turned, and went out of the arbour softly on her slippered feet.

And one-eyed Hadj stood there laughing, for he understood French very well, although he was half mad with keef.

"She'd go with an Arab!" he repeated. "She'd go with an Arab!" And then he saw his master.

The two Frenchmen sat staring at one another across the empty table under the shivering vine-leaves, which were now stirred continually by the wind of night. Lemaire's large face had gone a dusky grey. About his eyes there was a tinge of something that was almost lead colour. His loose mouth had dropped, and the lower lip disclosed his decayed teeth. His hands, laid upon the

table as if for support, shook and jumped, were never still even for a second.

Bouvier was almost purple. Veins stood out about his forehead. The blood had gone to his ears and to his eyes. Now he leaned across to Lemaire.

"Beat her!" he said. "Beat her for that! Hadj heard her. If you don't beat her, the Arabs——"

But before he had finished the sentence Lemaire had got up, with a wild gesture of his shaking hand, and gone unsteadily into the house.

That night Madame Lemaire suffered at the hands of her husband, while Bouvier and Hadj listened in the darkness of the court.

3

It was drawing towards evening on the following day, and Madame Lemaire was quite alone in the inn. Hadj had gone to the village for some more keef, and Lemaire and Bouvier had set out together in the morning for Batna.

So she was quite alone. Her face was bruised and discoloured near the right eye. Her head ached. She felt immensely listless. To-day there was no activity in her misery. It seemed a slow-witted, lethargic thing, undeserving even of respect.

There were no customers. There was nothing to do, absolutely nothing. She went heavily into the arbour, and sank down upon a chair. At first she sat upright. But presently she spread her arms out upon the table, and laid her discoloured face on them, and remained so for a long time.

Any traveller, passing by on the road from the desert, would have thought that she was asleep. But she was not asleep. Nor had she slept all night. It is not easy to sleep after such punishment as she had received.

And no traveller passed by.

The flies, finding that the woman kept quite still, settled upon her face, her hair, her hands, cleaned themselves, stretched their legs and wings, went to and fro busily upon her. She never moved to drive them away.

She was not thinking just then. She was only feeling —feeling how she was alone, feeling that this enormous sun-dried land was about her, stretching away to right and left of her, behind her and before, feeling that in all this enormous, sun-dried land there was nobody who wanted her, nobody thinking of her, nobody coming towards her to take her away into a different life, into a life that she could bear.

All this she was dully feeling.

Perfectly still were the diseased vine-leaves above her head, motionless as she was. On them the insects went to and fro, actively leading their mysterious lives, as the flies went to and fro on her.

For a long time she remained thus. All the white road was empty before her as far as eye could see. No trail of smoke went up by the growing crops beside the distant tents of the Spahis. It seemed as if man had abandoned Africa, leaving only one of God's creatures there, this woman who leaned across the discoloured table with her bruised face hidden on her arms.

The hour before sunset approached, the miraculous hour of the day, when Africa seems to lift itself towards the light that will soon desert it, as if it could not bear

to let the glory go, as if it would not consent to be hidden in the night. Upon the salt mountain the crystals glittered.

The details of the land began to live as they had not lived all day. The wonderful clearness came, in which all things seem filled with supernatural meaning. And, even in the dullness of her misery, habit took hold of Madame Lemaire.

She lifted her head from her arms, and she stared down the long white road. Her gaze travelled. It started from the patch of glaring white before the arbour, and it went away like one who goes to a tryst. It went down the road, and on, and on. It reached the green of the crops. It passed the Spahis' tents. It moved towards the distant mountains that hid the plains and the palms of Biskra.

The flies buzzed into the air.

Madame Lemaire had got up from her seat. With her hands laid flat upon the table she stared at the thread of white that was the limit of her vision. Then she lifted her hands and curved them, and put them above her eyes to form a shade. And then she moved and came out to the entrance of the arbour.

She had seen a black speck upon the road.

There was dust around it. As so often before she asked herself the question: "Who is it coming towards the inn from the desert?" But to-day she asked herself the question as she had never asked it before, with a sort of violence, with a passionate eagerness, with a leaping expectation. And she stepped right out into the road, as if she would go and meet the traveller, would hasten with stretched-out hands as to some welcome friend.

The sun dropped its burning rays upon her hair, and she realised her folly, took her hands from her eyes, and laughed to herself. Then she went back to the arbour and stood by the table waiting. Slowly—very slowly it seemed to Madame Lemaire—the black speck grew larger on the white. But there was very much dust to-day, and always the misty cloud was round it, stirred up by—was it a camel's padding feet, or the hoofs of a horse, or—? She could not tell yet, but soon she would be able to tell.

Now it was approaching the watered land, was not far from the Spahis' tents. And a great fear came upon her that it might turn aside to them, that it might be perhaps a Spahi riding home from his patrol of the desert. She felt that she could not bear to be alone any longer; that if she could not see and speak to someone before sunset she must go mad.

The traveller passed before the Spahis' camp without turning aside; and now the dust was less, and Madame Lemaire could see that it was a Nomad mounted on a camel.

With a smothered exclamation she hurried into the inn. A sudden resolve possessed her. She would prepare a couscous. And then, if the Nomad desired to pass on without entering the inn, she would detain him.

She would offer him a couscous for nothing, only she must have company. Whoever the stranger was, however poor, however filthy, ragged, hideous, or even terrible, he must stay a while at the inn, distract her thoughts for an instant.

Without that she would go mad.

Quickly she began her preparations. There was time.

He could not be here for twenty minutes yet, and the meal for a couscous was all ready. She had only to——

She moved frantically about the kitchen.

Twenty minutes later she heard the peevish roar of a camel from the road, and ran out to meet the Nomad, carrying the couscous. As she came into the arbour she noticed that it was already dark outside.

The night had fallen suddenly.

That night, as Lemaire and Bouvier were nearing the inn, riding slowly upon their mules, they heard before them in the darkness the angry snarling of a camel.

Almost immediately it died away.

"Madame has company," said Bouvier. "There's a customer at the Retour du Desert."

"Some damned Arab!" said Lemaire. "Come for a coffee or a couscous. Much good that'll do us!"

They rode on in silence. When they reached the inn, the road before it was empty.

"Mai foi," said Bouvier. "Nobody here! The camel was getting up, then, and Madame is alone again."

"Marie!" called Lemaire. "Marie! The absinthe!"

There was no reply.

"Marie! *Nom d'un chien!* Marie! The absinthe! Marie!"

He let his heavy body down from the mule.

"Where the devil is she? Marie! Marie!"

He went into the arbour, stumbled over something, and uttered a curse.

In reply to it there was a shrill and prolonged howl from the court.

"What is it? What's the dog up to?" said Bouvier,

whipping out his revolver and following Lemaire. "The table knocked over! What's up? D'you think there's anything wrong?"

The Kabyle dog howled again, slunk into the arbour from the court, and pressed itself against Lemaire's legs. He gave it a kick in the ribs that sent it yelping into the night.

"Marie! Marie!"

There was the anger of alarm in his voice now; but no one answered his call.

Walking furtively, the two men passed through the doorway into the kitchen. Lemaire struck a match, lit a candle, took it in his hand, and they searched the inn, and the court, then returned to the arbour. In the arbour, close to the overturned table, they found a broken bowl, with a couscous scattered over the earth beside it. Several vine-leaves were trodden into the ground near by.

"Someone's been here," said Lemaire, staring at Bouvier in the candlelight, which flickered in his angry and distressed eyes. "Someone's been. She was bringing him a couscous. See here!"

He pointed with his foot.

Bouvier laughed uneasily.

"Perhaps," he said—"perhaps it was the Devil come for her. You remember! She said last night, if he came, she'd go with him."

The candle dropped from Lemaire's shaking hand.

"Damn you! Why d'you talk like that?" he exclaimed furiously. She must be somewhere about. Let's have an absinthe. Perhaps she's gone to the village."

They had an absinthe and searched once more.

Presently Hadj, who was half mad with keef, joined

them. The rumour of what was going forward had got about in the village; and other Arabs glided noiselessly through the night to share in the absinthe and the quest, for that night Lemaire forgot to lock up the bottle.

But the hostess of the inn at El-Kelf has not been seen again.